

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 0759

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINS, PINT, ET, IT

SUBJECT: ITALIANS AND THE ELF

REF A. CAIRO 6295

B. ADDIS ABABA 9869

1. WITH REFERENCE TO ITALIAN GOVERNMENT ATTITUDE REPORTED REF A, I TOOK OPPORTUNITY DURING PRIVATE DISCUSSION WITH ITALIAN CONSUL GENERAL, ARMANDO DIAZ, TO ASK HIM JUST WHAT HIS UNDERSTANDING OF HIS GOVERNMENT'S ETHIOPIAN POLICY, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO ERITREA, IS AT THIS POINT. HE SAID THAT, DURING HIS RECENT LEAVE IN ROME, HE WAS ABLE TO DISCUSS ITALIAN POLICY TOWARD ETHIOPIA WITH THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE FOREIGN MINISTRY, AND THE IMPRESSION HE CAME AWAY WITH WAS THAT IT IS ONE OF CONSIDERABLE CONCERN, PRIMARILY BECAUSE OF THE ITALIAN INVESTMENT ("MILLE MILLIARD," PRESUABLY IN LIRE) IN ERITREA.

2. HITHERTO, HE SAID, ITALIAN POLICY HAS FUNCTIONED ON THE BASIS OF A GENERALIZED SUPPORT FOR THE EMPEROR'S GOVERNMENT, AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE IEG'S VIEW OF THE ERITREAN INSURGENCY, I.E. THAT IT INVOLVED A POLICE ACTION AND NOTHING MORE. NOW, SAID DIAZ, THE
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ITALIAN GOVERNMENT IS CONCERNED THAT, SHOULD NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN

THE NEW ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE INSURGENTS BEGIN, THEY MIGHT WELL END WITH AN INDEPENDENT ERITREA. HE CITED FRENCH DISCUSSIONS WITH THE ALGERIAN FLN, WHICH, HE SAID, BEGAN WITH DISCUSSIONS OF AUTONOMY, AND ENDED WITH AN INDEPENDENT ALGERIA. HE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT IT IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR HIM, IN HIS CAPACITY AS CONSUL GENERAL, TO ATTEMPT TO MAKE CONTACT WITH THE INSURGENTS, AND HE LED ME TO BELIEVE THAT ANY CONTACTS THAT THE ITALIAN GOVERNMENT CHOOSES TO MAKE WILL PROBABLY TAKE PLACE OUTSIDE ERITREA.

3. DIAZ'S PRESENT CONCERN WITH THE ELF (GC) INVOLVES, HOWEVER, A MUCH MORE PRESSING CONCERN THAN THE ULTIMATE PROTECTION OF ITALIAN INVESTMENTS. AT PRESENT, THREE ITALIAN NATIONALS (TWO TOURISTS AND ONE ERITREAN WITH AN ITALIAN PASSPORT) ARE BEING HELD AS HOSTAGES BY THE ELF (GC). ON SEPTEMBER 2, A MOTORBOAT BELONGING TO THE MELOTTI FAMILY, PROMINENT ITALIAN BUSINESS PEOPLE IN ASMARA, WHICH HAD BEEN LENT TO TWO YOUNG ITALIAN TOURISTS WHO CAME TO ETHIOPIA FROM ARUSHA, TANZANIA, WAS FOUND, EMPTY AND PARTIALLY BURNED, DRIFTING AT THE HEAD OF THE GULF OF ZULA, SOUTH OF MASSAWA. A NOTE WAS SUBSEQUENTLY RECEIVED BY THE MELOTTI FAMILY, INDICATING THAT THE TWO BOYS AND THE BOATMAN WERE IN THE HANDS OF THE ELF, AND THAT RANSOM WOULD BE DEMANDED. AS YET, NO SUM HAS BEEN NAMED. IT IS BELIEVED THAT THE VICTIMS HAD FOOLISHLY MOTORED INTO THE GULF OF ZULA, WHERE THEY HAD ENGINE TROUBLE, AND THEN DRIFTED ASHORE WHERE THEY WERE SEIZED BY AN ELF BAND. THE ENTIRE AREA, WHICH IS ADJACENT TO THE BURI PENINSULA - SITE OF A RECENT ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN ETHIOPIAN MILITARY FORCES AND THE ELF, WHICH CONCLUDED WITH THE RESCUE OF THE ETHIOPIAN MILITARY BY THE NAVY - SWARMS WITH ELF.

DIAZ IS VERY WORRIED AS TO HOW TO GO ABOUT SEEKING THE RELEASE OF THE HOSTAGES, AND TOLD ME THAT HE NOW BELIEVES HE WILL HAVE TO REQUEST ITALIAN DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATIVES IN BEIRUT TO SEEK CONTACT WITH ELF REPRESENTATIVES.

(NOTE: IF THOSE HOLDING THE HOSTAGES ARE, IN FACT, ELF (GC), THEIR REPRESENTATIVES MIGHT BE HARD TO REACH, AS IT IS THE PLF GROUP THAT IS REPRESENTED IN BEIRUT.) I SUGGESTED TO DIAZ THAT HE MIGHT PROPOSE TO HIS AMBASSADOR IN ADDIS ABABA THAT HE DISCUSS THE HOSTAGE QUESTION WITH OUR EMBASSY, IN VIEW OF OUR RECENT EXPERIENCE WITH THE TENNECO FOUR.

4. IN COMMENTING ON THE STRENGTH OF THE INSURGENTS IN ERITREA,
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DIAZ SAID HE BELIEVES THAT THEIR TOTAL STRENGTH IS BETWEEN FOUR AND FIVE THOUSAND, ALTHOUGH HE RECOGNIZES THAT ALL SUCH ESTIMATES ARE SUBJECT TO GROSS ERROR. ON THE BASIS OF INFORMATION REACHING HIM, HE SAID THAT IT APPEARS THAT THE ELF (GC) ARE STRONGER THAN EVER IN THE AREA AROUND AGORDAT, TO THE WEST OF ASMARA. HE ALSO OBSERVED THAT HE HAD REPORTS THAT RAS MENGESHA SEYOUM (ADDIS ABABA 10676), IN TIGRE PROVINCE, HAD BEEN MAKING CONTACT WITH THE ELF, LOOKING TOWARD A COMMON FRONT AGAINST ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT

FORCES.

5. COMMENT: DIAZ'S COMMENTS, TAKEN IN CONJUNCTION WITH THOSE OF THE ITALIAN MINISTER COUNSELOR, REPORTED IN REF A, SUGGEST THAT ITALIAN POLICY TOWARD ETHIOPIA IN GENERAL, AND ERITREA IN PARTICULAR, IS BEING REEXAMINED, BUT THAT NO HARD DECISIONS HAVE BEEN REACHED. DIAZ'S REMARKS CONCERNING ELF STRENGTH, AND POSSIBLE COOPERATION WITH OTHER DISSIDENTS, SHOULD BE TAKEN WITH A GRAIN OF SALT, AS ALL TOO OFTEN, IN THE ATMOSPHERE PREVAILING HERE, SUCH REPORTS PROVE EXAGGERATED, OR UNFOUNDED.
SHERRY

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